



Integrating Theory and Practice

A Review of Kurt Lewin's Field Theory in Social Science by Dorwin Cartwright; Resolving Social Conflicts by Gertrud Weiss Lewin

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SPECIAL BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Walter R. Nord
Book Review Editor

Books That Made A Difference

The reviews in this section vary from those we normally publish—in essence these are reviews. Whereas we usually invite people to assess a book's *potential* contribution to scholars in *general*, here we asked people to comment on a book's *realized* contribution to a scholar in *particular*. Consequently, these are quite personal statements.

People who, in our opinion, are leading management scholars were asked to review the book that had the most significant impact on their intellectual growth. (The idea stems from a similar request that the Olin Library at Washington University made of faculty and administrators. They attribute the idea to Patricia Holt of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who in turn attributes the idea to the poet and novelist Harold Brodkey.) Our sampling was not systematic, and a number of people declined our invitation.

These retrospective reviews of books that made a difference by people who have made a difference provide a bit of intellectual history. We hope, also, that others in our field might be stimulated to examine their own personal intellectual development and thereby increase reflexivity among scholars in our field.

I want to thank Chris Argyris, Arthur Brief, Edwin Locke, Edgar Schein, and Victor Vroom for their support in this endeavor and for the interesting essays that follow.

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Book Review Editor

Integrating Theory and Practice

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A Review of Kurt Lewin's *Field Theory in Social Science*, Dorwin Cartwright (Ed.), New York: Harper & Bros., 1951, and *Resolving Social Conflicts*, Gertrud Weiss Lewin (Ed.), New York: Harper & Bros., 1948.

As I recall my graduate years, several memories stand out:

The faculty were supportive of veterans getting on with their education, even if it meant breaking traditional academic boundaries.

Although the faculty expressed admiration for veterans who wanted to help make a better world, by and large they cautioned against such motives. The goal for any social scientist was to seek truth. Helping to solve important social problems was not likely because rigorous social science was in its infancy.

The faculty seemed most secure and comfortable when they were in unilateral control over the students. This was especially true in the way they conducted research. As a subject in experiments and questionnaire studies, I felt that the most important expectation they had of me was

to do as I was told and not ask any questions. The faculty seemed to feel that participating in their research as a subject was a privilege and, for a graduate student, an obligation.

These feelings upset me because they reminded me of the kind of world I wanted to alter. I began my academic career feeling a bit of a deviant, a feeling I still experience.

Reading the articles by Kurt Lewin, many of which are to be found in the two books that I am reviewing, was like a breath of fresh air. Here was a world-renowned scholar who was questioning the status quo in the academic community and was unabashedly interested in creating a better world. Lewin was a social scientist to the core. He seemed engrossed in conducting research in order to add to knowledge. In addition, he was dedicated to challenging the norms of the academy. Cartwright noted that Lewin was one of "those few men whose work changed fundamentally the course of social science in its most critical period of development" (p. vii).

There are four core themes in these books that greatly influenced my thinking and research:

1. Sound theory, for Lewin, was practical, and he integrated theory with practice in several ways. First, he framed the social sciences as the study of problems. Second, he selected problems that were critical for society. For example, he was concerned about leadership and democracy, educating informed and responsible citizens, and reducing prejudice of all kinds. Third, he began his studies by observations of real life. If one reads the original monographs of many of the early classical experiments, they contain nontrivial amounts of ethnographic descriptions. Fourth, Lewin connected all problems, no matter how small or temporary, large or long lasting, to theory. No problem was studied that would not be a test of theory. No theory was formulated that could not be tested through the study of problems. Practical problems were in the service of testing timeless theory.

In short, Lewin integrated theory with practice in every study. He took applicability so seriously

that he designed its requirements at the outset of each research project. At that time, either applicability was mentioned in academic journals in a few concluding paragraphs, or scholars cautioned against inferring the practical implications without further research. No one can argue against cumulative research. I suggest, however, that one reason applicability was so scant was that in the design of research external validity took a backseat to internal validity. This is not true for Lewin's work.

2. Lewin described his research strategy as one that seeks truth by successive approximations. He advised scholars to begin their research by framing the whole and then to differentiate the parts. Using this strategy, it would be less likely that the researcher would lose sight of the forest for the sake of the trees.

Wholeness should be studied less by researchers striving to produce generalizations of the type $X(f)Y$, and more by the use of metaphors and representations. Examples of the metaphors were *space of free movement*, *group atmosphere*, and *gatekeeper*. Lewin assigned meanings to these metaphors so that the reader could see what was included and excluded.

For example, the gatekeeper was in control of the gate that permitted or inhibited the players to fulfill their goals. Lewin showed how such a situation led the players to become dependent upon, and submissive toward, the gatekeeper; how they became concerned about his needs and currying his favor; and how that, in turn, could lead to competitive relationships among the players. These predictions applied to any gatekeeper, such as a business leader, a camp counselor, a parent, or a teacher.

Lewin was a master at drawing representations that included what he hypothesized to be the relevant variables, no matter what discipline or level of analysis they represented, and he made explicit the logical and empirical interdependence of the factors. The representations showed how the factors formed self-maintaining patterns and provided insights into what se-

quence of actions would be necessary in order to change the patterns.

Lewin had hoped that the mathematical discipline of topology could be used to produce these representations. I do not believe the use of topology succeeded. Nonetheless, his goals were achieved for a different reason. The topological models, in my opinion, were insightful diagrams that included the properties that cognitive science now tells us are necessary for knowledge to be usable in everyday life. The representations "chunked" the relevant variables in forms that could be stored and retrieved efficiently. They contained microcausal theories that explained how events came about and that could be used to design changes in the patterns.

3. Lewin produced constructs that could be used both to generalize and to understand the individual case. His work suggests that the dilemmas of statistical versus clinical or nomothetic versus ideographic could be resolved with the use of the metaphors and diagrams described above.

He also tested these assertions in many of his experiments by trying to bring about changes in individuals, groups, and organizational behavior. Lewin was the pioneer researcher/interventionist. He showed that the experimental mode could be placed into the service of change and that one of the most rigorous tests of understanding phenomena is to change them systematically. Lewin saw experiments as a form of social management.

4. Lewin, like Dewey, was concerned about placing social science in the service of democracy. He was bewildered by how many Americans took democracy for granted.

This concern for developing a better world was not something that he hid or played down. It was as if he felt that social scientists had a personal responsibility to be concerned about the issues that dealt with the quality of life. Responsibility to understand and initiative to act were core features of his sense of stewardship.

In this regard he predated Freire and other activists who sought to awaken the disempow-

ered. Lewin, for example, advised minorities that in addition to confronting the bigotry of their oppressors, they had to examine their own bigotry as well as their willingness to be disempowered.

If Lewin's approach would be more fully internalized by scholars and supported by the scholarly community, many of the nagging problems of producing logically consistent, empirically falsifiable, and usable knowledge would be solved at a much quicker pace.

An Awakening to History

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It now seems to me that different books, at different times and in different ways, have influenced how I have thought about organizational behavior. For instance, during graduate school at Wisconsin, I was introduced to Vroom's (1964) *Work and Motivation*, and, for a number of years thereafter, I repeatedly turned to the book for solutions to the puzzles I was trying to solve. Ray Aldag and I, for example, thought we had found in Vroom's book the answer to the question as to why the findings of Hackman and Lawler (1971) regarding the behavioral reactions of employees to specific attributes of their tasks often were not replicated (Aldag & Brief, 1979, pp. 59–62). For the last five years or so, however, I have found such solution-oriented books as Vroom's less engaging. Perhaps this is so because I have come to place as much emphasis on posing questions as on seeking answers to them. I finally have learned that the question one's empirical research is designed to address sets a limit on how informative and interesting the obtained findings will be.

The sort of book that now grabs my attention does so by creating a puzzle. This happens when a book negates an answer I had accepted or poses a question I had not conceived of previously. In both ways, Daniel T. Rodgers' (1974)